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Museum of Afro-American History. African Meeting House.

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Introduction:

The purpose of this brochure is to show the historical significance of the African Meeting House, not only to the development of Black culture, but to the entire history of Boston and the United States. It is necessarily limited in scope. But we hope that after you read it, you will appreciate why the restoration and preservation of the Meeting House is so important. And why we believe that it is unique among museums in the United States.

The Meeting House, Spring, 1974

The Museum of Afro American History
Afro American Meeting House
Smith Court, off Joy Street on Beacon Hill,
Boston, Mass. 02114.

1790-1808

Since before the American Revolution, the number of free Black residents in Boston had been growing steadily, until, by the beginning of the 19th century, the city's free Black population numbered nearly eleven hundred, and was one of the largest Black communities in North America.

The principal reason for this growth was that slavery had never really taken root in Massachusetts. It had never been officially part of Massachusetts law and most Bostonians, anyway, preferred to call Blacks who served them "indentured servants." Blacks could take Whites to court in the state and many won their freedom on technicalities. In fact, for all intents and purposes, slavery had ended in Massachusetts by 1780, and was officially abolished in 1783. From that point onward, Boston became a haven for runaway slaves.

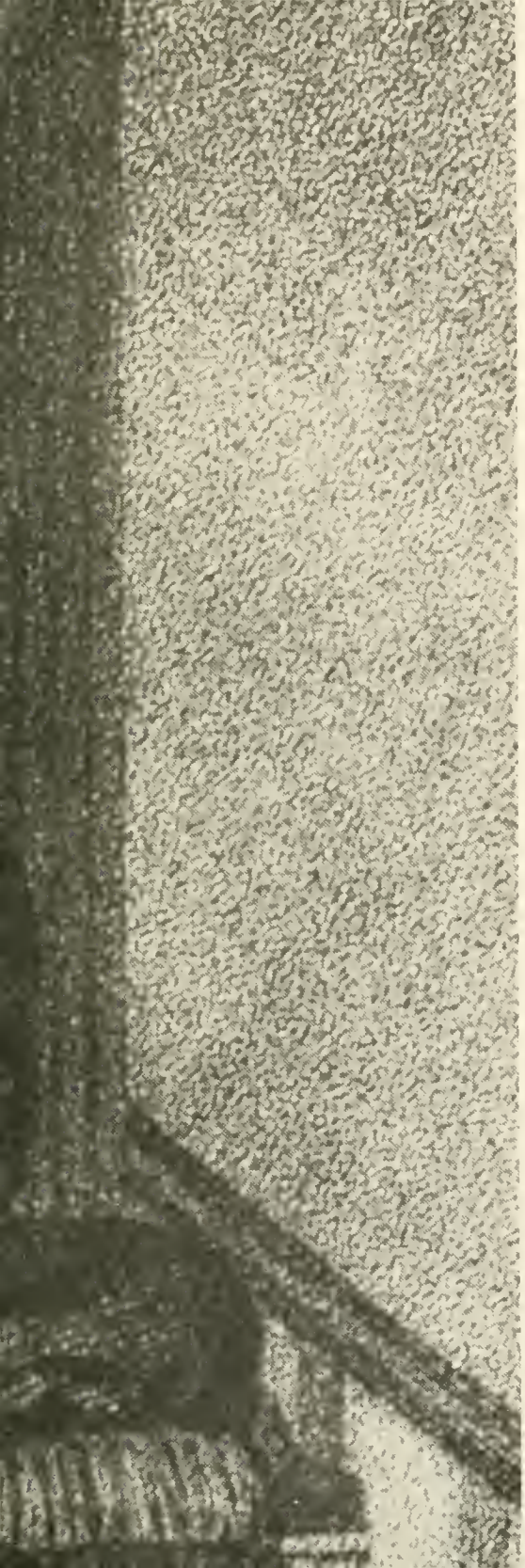
Traditionally, most of the city's Blacks lived in the North End. It was relatively inexpensive there and had the added advantage of being close to the businesses and industry of downtown Boston. But it was also a very crowded and rundown section of the city. And, as the Black population continued to grow, the community's leaders began to look elsewhere for a place to build a strong settlement.

The site they finally chose was the farmland on the north side of Beacon Hill. And between 1804 and 1805, the African Society, a religious and social organization composed of leading members of the community, began preparations to build a combination church and meeting house which would draw the Black population to the new area.

There is some evidence to suggest that the simple, yet eloquent, Federalist design of the Meeting House was conceived by the celebrated Boston architect, Asher Benjamin. He was active in the city at this time and the Meeting House bears many architectural similarities to other buildings he is known to have designed. But regardless of who the architect was, we do know that the actual construction of the Meeting House was carried out on a voluntary basis during 1806 by skilled craftsmen from within the Black community. We also know that much of the material used in the construction was salvaged from the Old West Church which was being rebuilt at the time.

Two years later, in 1808, a school for Black children was established in the basement of the Meeting House. It was later partially endowed by Abiel Smith, a wealthy Boston merchant, and remained the community's primary educational facility for nearly twenty-six years.

The first minister of the Meeting House was Thomas Paul (1773-1831), the founder of the movement for Independent Negro Baptist Churches in the United States. His ability as a preacher and organizer earned him invitations throughout the country and he was instrumental in helping many Black communities organize churches of their own. The most famous of these was the Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York City. It was established in 1808 and later became the largest Baptist Congregation in the world.



Thomas Paul.

The Meeting House before 1850.

1809-1834

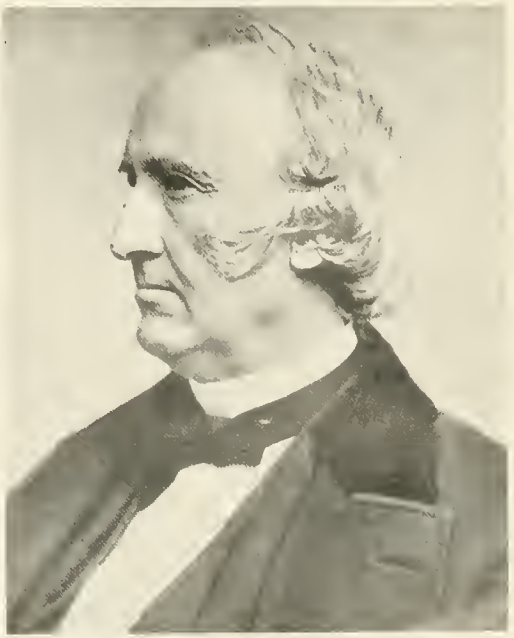
Throughout the first third of the 19th century, Boston's Black population continued to grow and prosper. And it was during this period that the community built the Smith School which adjoins the African Meeting House. It was the first school in the city built for Black children and was staffed by Harvard professors.

But the impact on the community of its own growing size and wealth was nothing compared to the changes that were being brought about by one of the most important movements of the 19th century: Abolition.

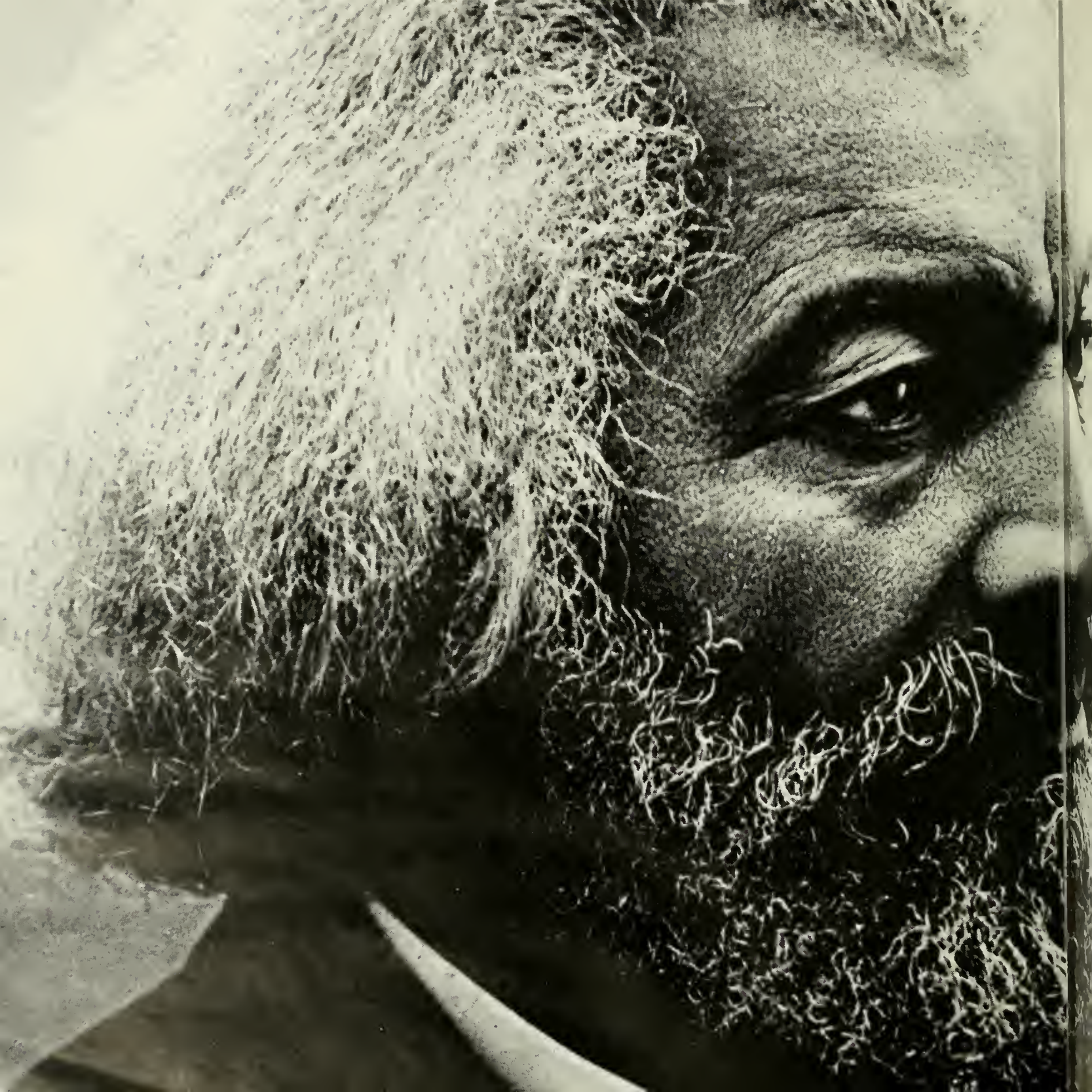
Few issues in the city's history have inspired such intense loyalty and animosity. To those who were in favor of abolition, it became almost a religion. To those who opposed it, it was considered the ultimate threat to both social and economic stability.

Since it was the only sizable building in Boston under the control of the Black community, the African Meeting House naturally became a center for the movement. And it was here, in 1834, that William Lloyd Garrison organized the New England Abolitionist Society. In the ensuing years, many leading Abolitionists, including Wendell Phillips, Charles Sumner, Henry Wilson and Anson Burlingame, stood on the church's platform to denounce the injustices of slavery. In fact, from this period until emancipation was finally achieved, the African Meeting House was known as the Abolitionist church.

William Lloyd Garrison.



Wendell Phillips.



Fredrick Douglass.

1835-1862

The social pressure and active agitation for abolition, which had begun in Boston in the 1830's, was heightened in 1850 by the enactment of the Fugitive Slave Law. In essence, this statute meant that Blacks who had escaped slavery in the South could be legally pursued North and forcibly returned to their masters.

The role that such men as Lewis Hayden, Frederick Douglass, and Charles Sumner played in helping fugitive slaves in Boston during this period, and in fighting for repeal of the Fugitive Slave Act, is one of the most fascinating stories in American History. But, one that could hardly be told in a brochure of this size. Needless to say, however, the 1850's was a period when the strength and courage of Boston's Black community was put to one of its severest tests. And the cohesiveness and determination that it showed during this period were nothing less than remarkable. For, though the fight for emancipation would go on relentlessly for another decade, through hard work and determination, solid progress was made in other areas.

In 1855, the community took a giant step toward social and political equality by winning integration for its children in the Boston Public Schools. An appeal made by the community to the general public for contributions to help refurbish the African Meeting House was also successful. And it was during the 1850's that the facade and the interior design of the building took its present form. The arched windows that now face Smith Court were added and the curved back wall, ceiling and curved stairways were also probably installed.

We will never know whether these architectural changes were made simply to fulfill the original intent of the building's designers, or whether they were conceived during this period as a way to improve the appearance and usefulness of the Meeting House. But it is an indication of the Black community's growing sense of pride and hope that these improvements were undertaken at a time when free Black Americans were facing their most severe trials as a people.

The Meeting House as it appeared from the late 1850's on.

1863-1898

Although Black Americans obviously had a great deal to either win or lose in the War Between the States, they were not officially allowed to serve in the Union forces until 1863. But soon after President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, John Andrew, an avid abolitionist and Governor of Massachusetts, was given permission to raise a Black regiment. This was the famous 54th, the first Black regiment in the Civil War. It was largely recruited by the most famous Black American of the period, Frederick Douglass and, not surprisingly, most of the recruiting was done in the African Meeting House.

At the end of the Civil War, cities such as Boston, with long established free Black communities, became symbols for much of what Black people wanted and hoped to achieve. And perhaps, no other building in Boston's Black community expressed these aspirations better than the African Meeting House. It represented not only a physical example of what free Black people could accomplish, but, more important, it symbolized their faith and hope in the future.

As the century drew to a close, however, the general migration of Boston's rapidly growing Black community from Beacon Hill to Roxbury and the South End had begun. And by the mid 1890's, the community's focal point had shifted away from Beacon Hill. The new residents moving into the area were predominantly Jewish and, in 1898, the African Meeting House was sold to the Congregation Libavitz.

Augustus Saint-Gaudens' bas relief of the 54th. Regiment. (Boston Common/Beacon St.)

Julia Smith

1899-1973

For 75 years, the Meeting House served as the Jewish Congregation's principal synagogue on Beacon Hill. By the beginning of the 1970's, however, the Congregation had diminished and the building was once again offered for sale. After lengthy negotiations, the Museum of Afro-American History was able to purchase the building in 1972.

Three months later, a fire was accidentally started while repairs were being made on the Meeting House. And though the structure was saved, the roof collapsed and the exterior walls were left dangerously close to collapse.

Fortunately, the Museum was able to make emergency repairs and a new roof has been built. And though the overall cost of completely restoring the Meeting House will eventually run into hundreds of thousands of dollars, the Museum hopes to have reconstruction completed in time for the Bicentennial in 1976. It's a project that we feel is vitally important.

The Afro-American Meeting House is the oldest extant Black church building in the United States. It is a National Historic Landmark and the cornerstone of Boston's Black Heritage Trail. But more than that, it's a unique visual testament to a people's courage, faith and pride. And that's a heritage which we want to preserve, not only for the people of Boston, but for Black and White Americans everywhere.

The interior of the Meeting House after the fire.

The fire on the night of Feb. 14, 1973.

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1974-1976

One of the most exciting aspects of the African Meeting House is that it offers the opportunity to build a museum around an existing historical structure as opposed to merely constructing a building to hold historical artifacts. And when restoration is completed in 1976, the building itself will become the museum's principal exhibit.

In fact, as nearly as possible, the sanctuary level will look just as it did in the 1850's with the added dimension of being able to accommodate the contemporary needs for religious services, lectures, concerts, community meetings, weddings, multi-media productions and orientation sessions for the Black Heritage Trail and Boston's Bicentennial celebration.

The ground floor will be converted into an exhibition area containing not cuments, but also a library as well as research and urator and his staff.

oduction, we believe that the African Meeting House reate a museum unlike any other in the country. One e amount, not only to our knowledge, but also to our and the common heritage of all Americans.

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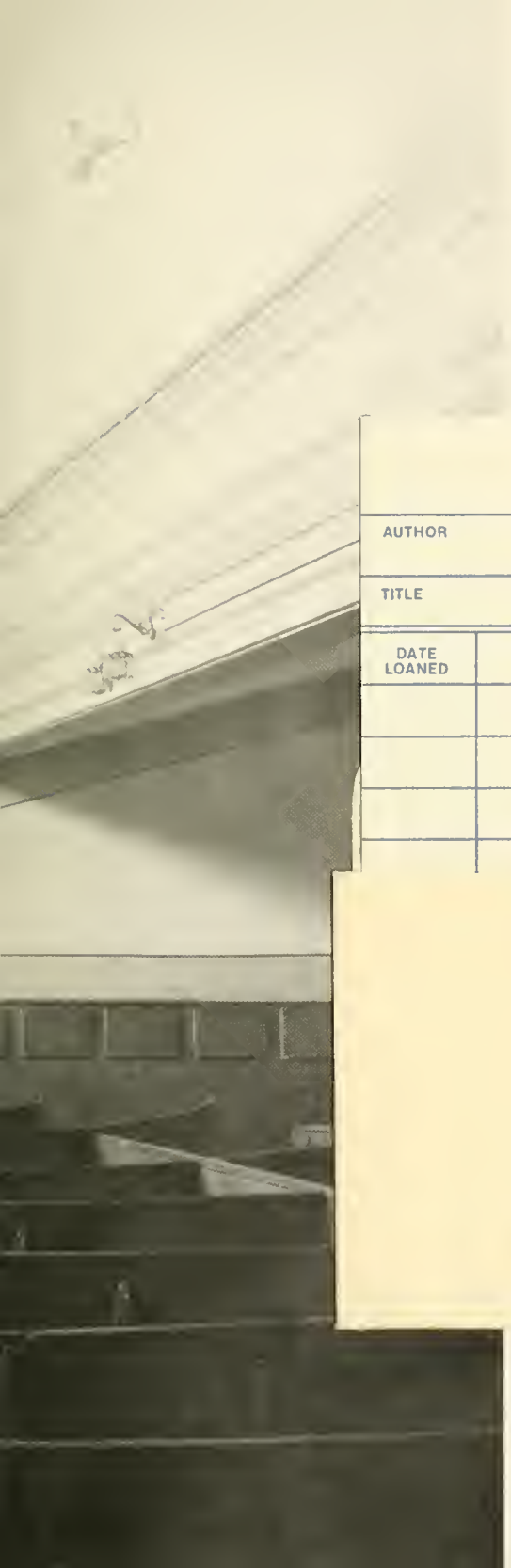

The interior of the church as it appeared in the 1890's.

Architectural rendering of the restored Meeting House.

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